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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007918

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS, S/CT, INR/B  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KPAO](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: DR. JAPAKIYA'S UNIVERSITY

REF: A. BANGKOK 7783

[B](#). BANGKOK 7750

Classified By: CDA Alexander A. Arvizu. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Dr. Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, Rector of the International Islamic University of Pattani, is one of the most prominent -- and controversial -- Muslim scholars in Thailand. The University he founded continues an ambitious expansion with the aid of Muslim charities and governments. Japakiya -- who has consistently denied rumors that he is connected with militant causes -- will remain an important figure in the reconciliation process as long as he can continue to balance his credibility with both southern Muslims and the Thai government. END SUMMARY

SOUTHERN THAILAND'S CONTROVERSIAL CLERIC  
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[1](#)2. (C) As noted in reftel A, Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member Frank Januzzi and poloffs had an extended meeting with Dr. Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, Rector of the International Islamic University of Pattani (formerly the Yala Islamic College) during a December 9 visit to the far southern Province of Yala. Japakiya is perhaps the most prominent Islamic cleric in southern Thailand and is one of the most recognizable Muslims serving on the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC).

[1](#)3. (C) Despite this public role and position on the NRC Japakiya is a controversial figure in Thailand. He is the most prominent Salafist scholar in Thailand -- distinguishing him from the majority of ethnically Malay Muslims in southern Thailand who practice a less doctrinaire form of Islam. The fact that his university has been the recipient of a large amount of aid from Persian Gulf based charities has also raised some eyebrows. Some Thai security officials have suggested privately that Japakiya has links with, provides guidance, or at least is sympathetic to southern separatist militants. Additionally, there have been some media reports that he has met with members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), including Ridwan Isamuddin (a.k.a. Hambali). For his part, Japakiya publicly acknowledges the donations his university receives and has consistently denied any involvement with militants.

YALA ISLAMIC COLLEGE BECOMES A UNIVERSITY  
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[1](#)4. (U) The International Islamic University of Pattani -- located in a rural area a few kilometers outside of Yala City -- is a sprawling campus, with modern buildings and manicured lawns. There are large multi-storied dorms, athletic facilities, and a well-maintained central administration building with signs greeting visitors in Thai, Arabic, and English. Polished (English speaking) school officials distribute glossy brochures extolling the University's programs and plans.

[1](#)5. (U) The original Yala Islamic College was founded by Japakiya in 1998. There are currently 1,239 undergraduates and 274 graduate students enrolled. This number includes: 77 registered international students from China, Cambodia, Sweden, Kazakhstan, and Malaysia. The school is in the final stage of the process to officially change its accreditation from a college to a university.

[1](#)6. (U) Dr. Japakiya told us that he was eager to continue to expand the size and academic scope of the University. He hopes to increase enrollment to 10,000 students, including plans to bring 1,000 or more international students to the campus. Curriculum will also be expanded beyond Islamic subjects to include IT, economics, Chinese, English, bio-technology, and clinical training.

[1](#)7. (C) The University receives some financial support from the Ministry of Education, collects tuition from students, and also receives a degree of funding from Muslim governments and private charities. For example, the government of Qatar is financing the cost of some of the new buildings on campus. Japakiya acknowledged that the school is dependent on funding sources from Muslim countries, but he says he was forced to accept these donations because the Thai government

wouldn't provide additional resources.

#### TRYING TO MAKE A POSITIVE IMPRESSION

18. (C) During our visit, Japakiya went out of his way to reachout to us and portray himself as a moderate educator. "I hope to have good cooperation with the U.S. Government," he said. He was concerned that "troublemakers" involved in violent attacks in the South might try to enroll in the University and incite trouble. However, he was adamant that no one from the school had been involved in the violence. Every person at the University -- including Japakiya -- signed an "anti-terror" pledge form, promising not to participate in violent activities. He indicated he would welcome USG outreach to the University, especially help with English language instruction.

19. (C) At the end of our conversation, Japakiya said that a "well-placed source" within the RTG had told him that he had been placed on a U.S. "blacklist" and would not be allowed to travel to the U.S. He asked that he be removed from the list as he had done nothing to warrant such a designation. (NOTE: In a subsequent meeting, a British Embassy Political Officer told poloff that Japakiya had raised similar concerns during a UK Embassy outreach to the Islamic University, asking "why are the Americans blacklisting me?" END NOTE)

#### COMMENT - INVOLVEMENT WITH SEPARATIST VIOLENCE?

10. (C) Japakiya is certainly a controversial figure. But is he Thailand's "Abu Bakar Bashir," as some have suggested? Probably not. Japakiya, through his public embrace of the royal family (he has several pictures of himself with the Crown Prince in his office waiting room), and participation in Thai government initiatives such as the NRC, is an unlikely public symbol of Muslim separatist aspirations in the South. However, much of Japakiya's background and past contacts remain opaque and he will continue to attract close scrutiny by Thai security forces.

11. (C) If anything, because of his public role Japakiya risks losing legitimacy in the eyes of radical Muslims by appearing to be "co-opted" and out of touch, like Thailand's Bangkok Muslims (reffel B). Japakiya is trying to walk a fine line between being a credible voice for aggrieved southern Muslims and being a responsible and respectable leader for the RTG to interact with. As long as he can maintain that balance, he will have a role to play in the reconciliation process. Given his connections and past contacts with Hambali and other unsavory elements, however, Japakiya's motives and intentions will continue to be suspect in some eyes. END COMMENT

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE -- Dr. Ismail Lutfi Japakiya

12. (C) Japakiya's background is shrouded in mystery. We are uncertain of his exact birth date. His personal staff told us privately that they are uncertain of his age but believe he is between 52-54 years old. They told us he was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia while his father was studying there as a religious student. However, some media accounts report that he was born in Pattani. Japakiya received his Ph.D. in Comparative Jurisprudence from the Islamic University of al-Imam in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1986.

13. (C) Japakiya's staff told us that he had visited the U.S. in 1994 to participate in a seminar on "Islamic Preaching" in Chicago, and has also attended other international Islamic conferences and seminars. These include a 1988 "Islamic Preaching" conference in Saudi Arabia; a 1992 conference on "Human Rights in Bosnia Herzegovina" held in Croatia; and a 1994 seminar on "Problems faced by Muslims" held in the Maldives. He has participated in various other Islamic conferences in Egypt, Malaysia, Germany, Belgium, Great Britain, and Saudi Arabia. In Thailand, he has served in various advising capacities, including as the Thai representative of the Kuwait Minister of Islamic Affairs; advisor to the Office of the Sheikhul Islam; and as an advisor to the Thai Army's 4th Region Commander. We understand that Japakiya is married and has several children. END BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ARVIZU